

## Teachers' Perspective on Challenges of Substance Abuse Prevention among Malaysian Secondary School Students

(Perspektif Guru terhadap Cabaran Pencegahan Penyalahgunaan Dadah  
dalam Kalangan Murid Sekolah Menengah)

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### ABSTRACT

*Substance abuse is a current and serious problem all around the globe. In fact, the number of substance abusers including school children and teenagers is growing. This study aims to identify challenges faced by secondary schools and the supports needed in the effort to curb substance abuse. A total of 18 high risk secondary schools were selected from Selangor, Wilayah Persekutuan Kuala Lumpur, Penang, Negeri Sembilan and Melaka. The questionnaire survey involved a total of 258 teachers from 18 selected schools. Data were analyzed descriptively using frequency counts and percentages. The results identified the lack of student participation, time constraints and financial problem as three main challenges in conducting drug prevention programmes in schools while the most crucial support needed by schools in organizing substance abuse programmes are material and financial support, anti-drug talk/clinic and professional advice. It is recommended that substance abuse prevention programmes should involve the students' families and the community to have better result. As for every substance abuse prevention programme held in schools, feedback from the participants should be obtained and analyzed in order to gauge the effectiveness and relevance of the programme. This study concluded that there are many challenges faced by schools in curbing substance abuse with lack of student participation, time constraints and financial problem posed as the main challenges. Hence, involvement of all parties is needed to provide support needed to ensure the success of the implementation of substance abuse prevention programmes.*

*Keywords: Substance abuse; challenges; drug abuse prevention program; secondary schools; students*

### ABSTRAK

*Penyalahgunaan dadah merupakan masalah terkini yang sangat membimbangkan di seluruh dunia. Malah, bilangan penyalahgunaan dadah melibatkan pelajar sekolah dan para remaja juga semakin bertambah. Kajian ini bertujuan untuk mengenal pasti cabaran yang dihadapi oleh sekolah-sekolah menengah dalam menangani masalah ini dan bantuan yang diperlukan bagi mengatasinya. Sejumlah 18 buah sekolah menengah berisiko tinggi telah dipilih dari Selangor, Wilayah Persekutuan Kuala Lumpur, Pulau Pinang, Negeri Sembilan dan Melaka. Tinjauan soal selidik dijalankan melibatkan seramai 258 orang guru daripada 18 buah sekolah terpilih. Data dianalisis menggunakan pengiraan kekerapan dan peratusan. Dapatan kajian menunjukkan bahawa masalah kekurangan penyertaan para pelajar, kekangan masa dan masalah kewangan merupakan tiga cabaran utama dalam menjalankan program pencegahan penyalahgunaan dadah di sekolah sementara bantuan utama yang diperlukan dalam menjalankan program ini adalah bantuan dari segi bahan dan kewangan, ceramah/klinik anti-dadah dan bantuan dari segi nasihat profesional. Satu saranan dalam pelaksanaan program pencegahan penyalahgunaan dadah di peringkat sekolah (PPDa) ialah melibatkan keluarga pelajar dan masyarakat setempat demi keputusan yang lebih memuaskan. Bagi setiap program pencegahan penyalahgunaan dadah yang dijalankan di sekolah, maklum balas daripada para peserta perlu dikumpul dan dianalisis bagi mengenalpasti keberkesanan dan kerelevanan program tersebut. Kajian ini mendapati bahawa terdapat banyak cabaran yang dihadapi oleh sekolah dalam menangani penyalahgunaan dadah seperti kekurangan penyertaan pelajar, kekangan masa, dan masalah kewangan yang merupakan cabaran utama. Dengan itu, penglibatan semua pihak adalah diperlukan untuk membekalkan sokongan yang diperlukan demi memastikan kejayaan pelaksanaan program pencegahan dadah.*

*Kata kunci: Penyalahgunaan dadah; cabaran; program pencegahan penyalahgunaan dadah; sekolah menengah; pelajar*

## INTRODUCTION

Currently, substance abuse is a serious global problem. It was reported that 75.6% i.e. about 10 million America's high school students have smoked cigarettes, drunk alcohol or used another drug, and nearly 46.1% i.e. 6.1 million are current users (The National Center on Addiction and Substance Abuse at Columbia University 2011). According to the Canadian Centre on Substance Abuse (2007), there is evidence to suggest that adolescents are the most likely to use substances. Research also indicates that the root of most social ills among youths usually begin while they are still attending schools. As they get older, these students move on to experimenting drugs and committing more hideous crimes such as robbing and even rape (Igwe, et al. 2009).

Due to the alarming rate of prevalence of substance abuse offenses committed, an in-depth research was carried out in order to discover the gap of information behind this serious transgression. Tull (2008) defines substance abuse as a type of uncontrolled behavior or addiction caused by harmful usage of any substances such as alcohol, drugs or any other dangerous substance that will lead to several detrimental effects on the individual's life. Thus, substance abuse can be defined as a dangerous behavior of uncontrolled addiction towards any unhealthy substances that will cost the abuser in terms of physical and mental health.

Closer to home in Malaysia, the National Anti-Drug Agency (AADK) reported that there has been an increase in the number of adolescents in drug misuse from 67 in 2009 to 1830 in 2010 (AADK 2010). In the Malaysian context, the prevalence of substance abuse varies among the cross section of the Malaysian society. According to Malaysian Psychiatric Association (2006), there has been a steady climb in the number of forbidden or prohibited drug usage in the last 10 years (NDA 2006). The data for the past 10 years suggest that the problem of substance abuse in Malaysia is getting worse by the year. An increasing trend was reported in Malaysia by the National Anti-Drug Agency (AADK) that the involvement of adolescents in drug misuse increased from 67 in 2009 to 1830 in 2010 (AADK 2010 December). Furthermore, Chan et al. (2009b) reported that students' involvement in drugs usually began while they were still in secondary school between the ages of 13 to 17 years old.

In a move to free Malaysian school students from substance abuse, the Ministry of Education has intensively organised a variety of early preventive strategies to overcome this drug threat. Substance Abuse Prevention Program (Program Pendidikan Pencegahan Dadah, PPDa) is one of the most important programs that has been implemented in all the primary schools in Malaysia. This program emphasises the basic aspects of preparation and social skills of school children so that they will not get involved with substance abuse. This is viewed as early preparation for students who may encounter peer pressure and to curtail the influence of the social phenomena. It

is hoped that this program will strengthen the students' relationship with society and thus help prevent drug abuse. Similar programs like that of PPDa include (AADK 2004):

1. Zero Drug Program in Primary School (PROSIDAR-*Program Sifar Dadah Sekolah Rendah*)
2. Intellect Spiritual Nurturing Program (PINTAR-*Program Intelek Asuhan Rohani*)
3. PINTAR Camp, PINTAR Club and Inheriting PINTAR
4. Training of Trainers (TOT)
5. Program for Parents and Teachers Association (PTA)
6. Our School Protege Program (OSPP)
7. Student Intervention Program (SIP)
8. Student Intervention Program Camp (SIPC)
9. Anti-Drug week
10. 5 Minutes Drug Program
11. Urine Test
12. School Staff Program
13. Seminar/Talk/Exhibition/Carnival on Anti-drugs
14. Anti-Drugs Video Show
15. Campus Solidarity Program
16. Anti-Drug Squad in Higher Education Institutions.
17. Orientation Program and Convocation Week in University

These strategies show the importance of implementing the Substance Abuse Prevention Program (PPDa) beginning with the primary school students. Students should be exposed to an efficient education system and be made aware of the dangers of drugs at an early age. Hence, the implementation of PPDa is expected to prevent future students from being negatively affected by this serious problem (NDA 2003). In addition, primary schools students form the largest potential group in any educational institution who are exposed and influenced by the substance abuse issues. Schools should play an active role in ensuring that their students are not influenced and involved with substance abuse.

Since drug addiction is portrayed by high-risk behaviours, hence, schools need to detect factors contributing to substance abuses via the PPDa programs (Mohamed Izham et al. 2002). It is the responsibility of school administrators, teachers and staff to have the knowledge and awareness about the patterns and possible factors of youth involvement in substance abuse (Mohd Muzafar Shah & Abdul Malek 2005). A high awareness regarding this issue is vital in order to create educational institutions that are free from substance abuse. School institutions should take an active role in the early prevention stage as well as in creating a conducive and protective environment to fight against the involvement of substance abuse and to combat the risks induced by negative behaviour among students (KPM 2006).

In secondary schools, substance abuse prevention education is introduced in the Physical Education subject under the topic, "Healthy Lifestyle". Through substance abuse prevention education, it will educate students on the causes and effects of drug abuse. The vast majority of

schools apply various classroom-based substance abuse prevention strategies and curricula to deter early stage drug use and its damaging consequences (Birkeland et al. 2005; Hecht et al. 2006). However, according to Schroeder & Johnson (2009), the potential programmes that have been identified should best fit with the students' needs and should be thoroughly reviewed whether they are suitable to be implemented during school or not.

Therefore, the objectives of this study are to investigate the challenges that schools face and the kind of help that they need in curbing substance abuse among secondary school students. The study also aims to identify effective strategies to curb substance abuse among secondary school students in Malaysia. Three research questions are posed in this study:

1. What are the challenges that schools face in curbing substance abuse among secondary school students?
2. What kinds of support do schools need in curbing substance abuse among secondary school students?
3. What kinds of collaboration do schools need to curb substance abuse among the students?

## METHODS

### RESPONDENTS

This study focuses mainly on secondary schools which recorded high cases of substance abuse. These schools were chosen based on random sampling from 18 high risk schools from 5 different states, namely Wilayah Persekutuan Kuala Lumpur, Selangor, Negeri Sembilan, Melaka and Penang. These schools were then further categorized under urban, suburban and rural schools. A total of 258 teachers from the 18 high risk schools selected responded to this study. They were physical education teachers, secretaries of the drug prevention programmes, counsellors, disciplinary teachers and senior assistants of student affairs.

### RESEARCH DESIGN AND INSTRUMENTATION

In this survey study, the researchers employed questionnaires to collect data. The questionnaires were used as they allow both qualitative and quantitative data to be collected at the same time, from a large number of respondents. Data in this study consisted of self-report questionnaires mostly quantitative, because a descriptive research can use data from a survey procedure (Crano & Brewer 1986; Leedy & Omrod 2001). The Survey Questionnaire was adapted from the survey questionnaire developed by Chan et al. (2009a) with a group of experienced counsellors, physical education teachers and secretaries of PPDa from 8 different states in Peninsular Malaysia in the Primary School Substance Abuse Prevention study.

### PILOT STUDY

Attempts were made to ensure that the questionnaires were valid and reliable. Copies of the proposed questionnaires were piloted in three secondary schools in Negeri Sembilan. Sixty physical education teachers, 3 secretaries of the drug prevention programs, 3 counsellors, 15 disciplinary teachers, and 3 senior assistants in charge of student affairs from these three selected secondary schools were selected to answer the questionnaires. The Cronbach's alpha of the students' responses to the questionnaire was ascertained at .78 for the construct of challenges, .87 for the construct of support needed, and .89 for the construct of collaboration needed. The reliability index indicated that the instrument is reliable to measure challenges faced, support and collaboration needed for successful implementation of substance abuse prevention in the secondary schools in Malaysia.

After the pilot study, the questionnaires were subjected to content validation by a panel of experts consisting of 5 senior school teachers teaching physical and health education and drug prevention programme. All members of the panel were presented with a set of the instrument and informed of the purpose of the instrument. They were then requested to study the items and decide on the suitability of the items. They were asked if any other items should be included to fulfill the purpose of the instrument and to comment on any part of the items that they felt needed amendment or clarification.

### DATA ANALYSIS

In this study, data obtained were analysed using descriptive statistics involving frequencies and percentages. Descriptive statistics were used to analyze the data for the seriousness of the substance abuse problem in secondary schools. Then the data were constantly compared and contrasted and analyzed using both deductive and inductive analysis to answer the research questions posed in this study. Written feedback collected from the open-ended questions in the questionnaire was analysed according to themes and then triangulated with the quantitative data collected through questionnaires.

## RESULTS

### CHALLENGES FACED BY SCHOOLS IN CURBING SUBSTANCE ABUSES

The data collected from the questionnaires indicated that there were three main challenges faced by schools in Malaysia on drug prevention programmes, namely 'lack of student participation', 'time constraints' and 'financial problem'. Table 1 shows that the main challenge faced as agreed by the majority of the respondents (32%) was the lack of participation from students. This has made the

substance abuse prevention programmes less successful in schools. Most of the respondents also mentioned that the organized programmes lacked support from the students as they (the students) found these programmes not interactive enough. Besides that, quite a number of the respondents also pointed out that the high risk students were among those who would simply skip school when the prevention programmes were organized.

TABLE 1. Main challenges faced by schools in organizing PPDA programmes (N = 251)

Main Challenges	Frequency	Per cent
Lack of student participation	80	32.0
Time constraints	47	18.7
Financial Problem	45	17.9
Lack of interactive and effective activities	38	15.1
Lack of parental support	15	6.0
Lack of teacher manpower	10	4.0
Lack of professional support	9	3.6
Lack of information on substance abuse	7	2.8
Total	251	100

In addition, about 18.7% of the respondents stated that 'time constraints' was a challenge in organizing anti-drug programmes in schools. Some of the respondents mentioned that school hours were usually packed with academic programmes that were arranged for students. In addition, they also stated that the need to complete the syllabus by the end of school year also limited the time to organize the anti-drug programmes in schools. Thus, time constraints in school also led to the lack of teacher manpower (4%) in organizing substance abuse prevention programmes in schools.

A total of 18% of the respondents emphasized that schools faced financial constraints when organizing anti-drug prevention programmes. Some of the respondents mentioned that in order to organize more interactive and effective prevention programmes more sufficient financial support is needed. 15.1% of the respondents stated that most of the prevention programmes that were organized in schools were unattractive and ineffective. This could be due to the lack of experience on the part of the teachers in organizing these PPDA programmes as well as the lack of information on substance abuse (2.8%).

In terms of support given by others, the respondents mentioned that the lack of parental support (6%) in organizing the programmes was also one of the challenges that they faced. They further explained that parents' support in organizing the prevention programmes might involve material support as well as educating and supporting the students at their own home. In addition, 3.6% of the respondents pointed out that professional support should

be given in terms of professional advice regarding this substance abuse issue.

Similar findings were also identified from the open-ended questions in the questionnaire. The lack of financial support, time constraints and the lack of student involvement were seen as major threats to the success of PPDA programmes. A majority of the respondents who were school counsellors, discipline teachers and PPDA secretaries in their respective schools highlighted the fact that they were all involved in conducting numerous activities and would like to do more but the lack of funds posed a major problem.

They also emphasized that they had difficulties getting cooperation from various parties in supporting the events held. In addition, respondents highlighted that parents, teachers and students were all responsible for the prevention of substance abuse in schools. They pointed out that it is important for both parents and teachers to cooperate in order to help students to be aware of the dangers of substance abuse.

Approximately 3.6% of the respondents stated that the lack of teachers in schools was also one of the possible challenges in organizing prevention programmes. This finding was also supported by data obtained from the open-ended questions in the questionnaire. One of the respondents pointed out that teachers in schools were mostly burdened with too much paperwork which resulted in the non-participation of teachers in organizing activities that could help in preventing substance abuse among the students. Another respondent mentioned that the teacher population in his school was small and hence it was rather difficult to arrange numerous PPDA programmes for the school. The point was further supported by other respondents who stressed that only a limited number of teachers were available to monitor and organize the programmes as most teachers were burdened with some other programmes besides carrying a heavy school workload.

#### SUPPORT NEEDED BY SCHOOLS TO CURB SUBSTANCE ABUSES

Data in Table 2 revealed three main support and help that schools needed to organize substance abuse programmes which included material and financial support, anti-drug talk/clinic and professional advice. Almost 30% of the respondents agreed that materials and financial support were very important in organizing a substance abuse prevention programme. 41% of the respondents felt that anti-drug talk/clinic as well as professional advice were needed to ensure success in substance abuse prevention programmes. Open-ended findings from the questionnaires further revealed that schools welcome support from the outside. These teachers highlighted that support from agencies such as National Anti-Drug Agency, National Association for the Prevention of Drug/*Persatuan Mencegah Dadah Malaysia* (PEMADAM) and Non Government Organizations (NGO) were very



important in providing material support, financial support as well as providing professional advice. In addition, other types of support and help needed by the schools included more proactive and interactive modules (9.8%), skill and information support (5.9%), and programmes to conduct regular urine test and programmes to organize trips to rehabilitation centre (4.8%).

TABLE 2. Support needed to organize substance abuse prevention programmes (N = 205)

Support Needed	Frequency	Per cent
Material and financial support	61	29.8
Anti-Drug talk/Clinic	44	21.5
Professional advice	40	19.5
More proactive and interactive module	20	9.8
Supervision by anti-drug agencies	18	8.8
Skill and information support	12	5.9
Regular urine test	5	2.4
Trip to rehabilitation centre	5	2.4
Total	205	100.0

#### COLLABORATION WITH ANTI-DRUG AGENCIES IN ORGANIZING SUBSTANCE ABUSE PREVENTION PROGRAMMES IN SCHOOL FROM 2009-2011

Results in Table 3 showed that Malaysian schools have collaborated with four main agencies/associations in combating substance abuse in schools which were, namely the National Anti-Drug Agency, Royal Malaysian Police Force, Parents-Teachers Association, and National Association for the Prevention of Drug (PEMADAM). Almost 34% of the schools surveyed collaborated with AADK in organizing drug prevention programmes in schools. Some of the teachers mentioned that anti-drug talk, exhibition as well as video screening were carried out by AADK in their schools.

TABLE 3. Collaboration with anti-drug and other agencies (N=212)

Agencies	Frequency	Per cent
National Anti-Drug Agency (AADK)	72	34.0
Royal Malaysian Police Force (PDRM)	71	33.5
Parents-Teachers Association (PIBG)	34	16.0
National Association for the Prevention of Drug (PEMADAM)	21	9.9
PROSTAR (Healthy Lifestyle Without AIDS Programme)	11	5.2
Malaysia Ministry of Health	2	0.9
SLAD (Anti-Drug Education Programme)	1	0.5
Total	212	100.0

Table 3 shows that 33.5% of the schools partnered Royal Malaysian Police Force to organize anti-drug activities in schools. Among the activities carried out by PDRM that were mentioned by the respondents were anti-drug talk, exhibition, video screening as well as conducting urine test on the students.

Other collaborating associations were Parents-Teachers Association (16%), PEMADAM (National Association for the Prevention of Drug) (9.9%), PROSTAR (Healthy Lifestyle Without AIDS Programme) (5.2%), Malaysia Ministry of Health (0.9%) and SLAD (Anti-Drug Education Programme) (0.5%).

#### DISCUSSION

This study identified three main challenges in conducting drug prevention programmes in schools. These are the lack of student participation, time constraints and financial problem. It is evident that these challenges are inter-related and some of these challenges namely time constraints and the lack of student interest have been identified by Chan et al. (2009a) as common problems in substance abuse prevention in the primary schools in Malaysia. This is corroborated by Maithya (2009) who noted that schools administrators cited a number of challenges in their fight against drug abuse. One of these challenges was the inflexible time schedules for school counselors who are also teachers.

Time constraints have been one of the more profound challenges shackling the teachers from giving it their all in organizing drug prevention programmes. Having to juggle between academic responsibilities such as teaching, marking and training students and carrying out administrative tasks, teachers are left with little time to focus on other efforts. On top of that, the budget allocated for such programmes is meagre. Therefore, teachers are put in a tight spot in preparing a programme that could appeal and appear interactive as preferred by the students. Apart from that, it is also interesting to note that seemingly, during these programmes, the high risk students are also the ones who would likely skip school; hence, defeating the main purpose as the targeted group who would benefit the most from the programme would not be present.

Based on this situation, it is important to call upon the relevant agencies to help support and contribute to the success of prevention programmes in schools. As revealed by the study, the most crucial support needed by schools in organizing substance abuse programmes are material and financial support, anti-drug talk/clinic and professional advice. With the collaboration and support between relevant agencies and the schools, the likelihood of the programmes being a success can be increased significantly. According to Maithya (2009) teachers in Kenya also felt ill-equipped to handle issues related to drug abuse in particular their inability to monitor students out of school especially in day schools, lack of clear guidelines on what action to take against drug abusers and lack of training on issues related

to drug use and abuse. This finding has been supported by studies conducted by Igwe et al. (2009) and Chan et al. (2009a) that the involvement of relevant agencies is crucial to provide relevant support for the implementation of substance abuse prevention programmes.

In addition to that, collaboration between the relevant agencies and the school has been iterated as one of the important strategies in implementing prevention programmes to curb substance abuse among school students by Schroeder & Johnson (2009) and Chan et al. (2009a). By far, the four main agencies/associations which have collaborated with numerous schools across Malaysia are National Anti-Drug Agency, Royal Malaysian Police Force (PDRM), Parents-Teachers Association and National Association for the Prevention of Drug (PEMADAM). These collaborations have been reported by some of the respondents as very beneficial due to the fact that the presence of authorities directly involved with substance abuse other than the teachers gives a higher sense of confidence and attracts the students' attention. Apart from that, the experience and knowhow of the experts have helped the teachers to be better equipped to prepare for future substance abuse prevention programmes.

#### RECOMMENDATIONS

It is clear from the findings of this study that the responsibility of curbing the problem of substance abuse in schools does not only rest on the shoulders of the schools and the Ministry of Education alone. This is a collective responsibility of the students themselves, their parents and the community at large. Maithya (2009) found that one of the challenges faced by schools in Kenya is the lack of support of the parents to fight this menace. As observed by Dini Rahiah (2008), to inhibit adolescents from being involved in negative consequences such as substance abuse, there should be a strong family bond and the community should set positive standards for behavior for students to follow. Research (Bahr et al. 2005; Cleveland et al. 2005; Dick et al. 2007; DiClemente et al. 2001) has shown that there is a reduction in substance abuse among adolescents when parents have increased knowledge of adolescent behaviours. What this means is that schools should consider involving the students' families and the community when organizing school level substance abuse prevention programmes. It has to be a collective effort to reap the maximum benefit.

In addition, it is undoubtedly important that substance abuse prevention efforts be accompanied with adequate financial, material and professional support. The ability to produce attractive, interactive, interesting teaching approaches and relevant teaching aids are highly dependent on these three factors, therefore schools and students should not be deprived of it. Furthermore, it is also vital to note that to fully measure the effectiveness of any programme and in this case, substance abuse prevention programmes,

feedback from the participants is essential. As much as it is important to provide the best materials and the most suitable teaching approaches, it is even more crucial to measure the learning and behavioural outcomes. Therefore, it is the suggestion of the research team that for every substance abuse prevention programme held in schools, feedback from the participants should be obtained and analyzed in order to gauge the effectiveness and relevance of the programme. Additionally, this data will also provide valuable input that can be used to further enhance existing methods and help with the production of new programmes to suit the current scenario and target audience.

#### CONCLUSION

This study concluded that there are many challenges faced by schools in curbing substance abuse with the lack of student participation, time constraints and financial problem identified as the main challenges. The findings of this study also reveal that the support needed by schools to curb this problem including material and financial support, anti-drug talk/clinic and professional advice. It is clear from the findings that establishing a strong collaboration between the agencies/associations and the schools, parents and the public is crucial to infuse a better understanding of substance abuse and encourage the public to support any efforts to fight against it. Proper strategic plan and the involvement of all parties must be implemented in order to prevent further detrimental effects of substance abuse among Malaysian secondary school students.

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